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ABSTRACT

In an effort to determine the relationship between English language/writing skills and academic performance in a college-level U.S. History course, a study was conducted of all students enrolled in freshman U.S. History at Oxnard College (California) in spring 1990. The study sample consisted of 112 students, whose scores on the English Subtest of the Assessment and Placement Services Exam for Community Colleges were recorded. In addition to comparing those students demonstrating college-level English/writing skills with those not demonstrating such skills, the sample was also sorted to identify those students who had successfully completed a college-level English course prior to enrolling in U.S. History. The proportion of students in this latter group who successfully completed U.S. History was computed, as was the proportion of students in the remainder of the sample who successfully completed the course. Study results included the following: (1) 46 of the 73 students (63%) who had tested below college-level English successfully completed U.S. History, while 21 of the 26 of the students (81%) who tested at college-level English successfully completed the course; (2) 76% of the students who took a college-level English course prior to enrolling in U.S. History successfully completed the course while 63% of students who had not taken a college-level English course completed the history course; and (3) none of the differences between the groups in the study were found to be statistically significant at the .05 level, suggesting that college-level English skills are not a prerequisite to successful completion of college-level U.S. History. (PAA)

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS AND THEIR EFFECT ON U.S. HISTORY COURSE SUCCESS AT OXNARD COLLEGE

by

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October 21, 1991

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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to address students' English language skills and their effect on U.S. History course success. The sample for this study included all students at Oxnard College who enrolled in U.S. History in the spring term, 1989-90. One hundred and twelve (112) students met this qualification and, once they were identified, their scores on the English Subtest of the Assessment and Placement Services Exam for Community Colleges were recorded.

The results of this study indicated that at Oxnard College, college-level English skills do not appear to be a prerequisite to the successful completion of a college-level U.S. History course. As such, the researchers speculated that the U.S. History course curricula does not require extensive college-level English skills to achieve a passing grade.

Because these conclusions were anomalous to much of the previous research, it was recommended that a follow-up study be implemented. It was also noted that the researchers were concerned that over ten percent of the students in the sample population had not been administered the entry-level assessment as strongly suggested by the Oxnard College matriculation process.

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PURPOSE

In 1989 the California Board of Governors developed regulations to ensure student access and success (Title V Regulations, September 1989, California Board of Governors). In response to these titles a variety of studies have been designed by the Community College Research Group in California. This study is in response to one of the designs put forth by the research group and specifically addresses students' English language skills and their effect on U.S. History course success.

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Students entering the California Community College system are tested for basic skills in English, reading and math. The results of these test scores are used to place students appropriately in either remedial classes or college-level classes. Mandated by law, this testing program was a legislative attempt at assuring both access and success for the thousands of students attending California Community Colleges.

In addition to these legislative concerns, the California Board of Governors in their Title V Regulations, addressed these concerns as well as concerns related to the integrity and content of college level courses. These Title V Regulations, commonly referred to as strengthening standards, resulted in curriculum reform in many, if not most, college transfer courses. One of the courses which the strengthening standards emphasized was the freshman U.S. History course.

Both the legislative insistence on assessment and placement (access and success) and the Board of Governors strengthening standards for curriculum frameworks, made it essential for colleges to look at basic skills and their effectiveness in predicting success in college level courses. While this study will not attempt to run a regression analysis to make those predictions, it will look at one set of skills, language skills to determine if these skills facilitate success in the mandated U.S. History college transfer course.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A cursory review of research related to English language skills and success in a college-level history course was undertaken. Few studies could be found that related to these variables; however, at Santiago Community College, Kessler (1989) attempted to predict college success using both personal and academic factors. One of the variables he studied was entering student basic language skills and their relationship to success in math classes. The results indicated that the English test scores did indeed predict success in math classes and the math test scores appeared to predict success in such non-math classes as political science and speech.

At the University of Oklahoma, Thompson (1989) studied the effects of a "writing across the curriculum program" on grades in an American History class. Though his sample was small, it was found that the experimental group, (those students participating in extensive writing exercises and language skills building) received significantly higher mid-term grades in their American History class.

Wood (1988) hypothesized that reading and language skills were related to college grades across the curriculum. His research indicated college grades in all subjects, including history, appear to be best predicted by previous grades. According to his study, the next best predictor of college grades appear to be reading tests or general aptitude batteries. He hypothesized that reading and language skills should be stressed, if grades and retention are to be improved.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study was ex-post-facto in nature. It was designed to compare English Language and writing skills with success in a college-level U.S. History course. Specifically, the following research questions were investigated:

1. Is there a significant difference in the proportion of students successfully completing a college-level U.S. History course between students who have demonstrated college-level English skills and students who have not demonstrated college-level English skills.[2]

2. Is there a significant difference in the proportion of students successfully completing a college-level U.S. History course between students who have successfully completed a college-level English course and students who have not successfully completed a college-level English course prior to enrolling in U.S. History.[2]

3. Is there a significant difference in the proportion of students successfully completing a college-level U.S. History course between students who have successfully completed a college-level or non-college level English course and students who did not complete an English course prior to enrolling in U.S. History.[2]

HYPOTHESES

The following three Null Hypotheses (Ho) were investigated in this study:

1. There will be no significant difference in the proportion of students successfully completing U.S. History (102 or 103) between the cohort of students who have demonstrated college-level English skills on an entry-

level assessment and the cohort of students who did not demonstrate college-level English skills on the same entry-level assessment.

2. There will be no significant difference in the proportion of students successfully completing U.S. History (102 or 103) between the cohort of students who successfully completed a college-level English course prior to enrolling in U.S. History and the cohort of students who did not successfully complete a college-level English course prior to enrolling in U.S. History.

3. There will be no significant difference in the proportion of students successfully completing U.S. History (102 or 103) between the cohort of students who successfully completed a college-level or non-college level English course prior to enrolling in U.S. History and the cohort of students who did not successfully complete a college-level or non-college level English course prior to enrolling in U.S. History.

METHODOLOGY

The sample for this study included all students at Oxnard College who enrolled in U.S. History in the spring term, 1989-90. One hundred and twelve (112) students met this qualification and, once they were identified, their scores on the English Subtest of the Assessment and Placement Services Exam for Community Colleges were recorded. This sample was divided into two groups: those demonstrating college-level English/writing skills and those who did not demonstrate college-level English/writing skills. Within each of these groups, the proportion of students successfully completing U.S. History was calculated and the z-test for two population proportions was run to determine if the observed difference in the proportions successfully completing U.S. History was significant at the .05 level of confidence.

The original sample of 112 students was sorted again to find those members of the sample who had successfully completed a college-level English course prior to enrolling in U.S. History. The proportion of students in this group successfully completing U.S. History was computed as was the proportion of students in the remainder of the sample who successfully completed the U.S. History course. The z-test for two population proportions was again run to determine if the observed difference in these proportions was significant.

Finally, the original sample was sorted to determine those students who successfully completed any English course (college-level or non-college level) prior to enrolling in the U.S. History course. The proportion of these students successfully completing U.S. History was compared to the proportion of all other

students in the original sample successfully completing the U.S. History course using the z-test for two population proportions.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

The Community College Research Group has specified that a student successfully completes a course if the student's transcript delineates a grade of "A", "B", "C" or "CR" for each course attempted. Likewise, the research group has specified that nonsuccessful completion of a course is delineated by a grade of "D", "F", "NC" or "I" on the transcript.

Secondly, U.S. History has been defined as a course in History of the United States (parts I or II) which fulfills the American Institution's requirement for students who plan to transfer or graduate with an AA or AS degree.

The entry-level assessment at Oxnard College is the Assessment and Placement Services Exam for Community Colleges produced by the College Board. The exam is an outgrowth of the Comparative Guidance and Placement Services Exam developed by the College Board and normed nationally. The English Subtest includes 40 items and the Oxnard College English faculty established a raw score of 29 or better as indicating college-level English Skills.

LIMITATIONS

Several assumptions have been made concerning the efficacy of the college prescribed entry-level assessment. Most notably, it has been assumed that a score of 29 or better on the writing subtest is indicative of college-level English skills and that students who do not achieve this score, are writing below college level. In a recent study, Jones and Jackson (1991) pointed out that this cut-off score was well above the national mean and also expressed concern about the recency of the test's validity and reliability studies.

The sample size was much smaller than the researchers had anticipated. There were only five sections of U.S. History offered during the term studied and the sample included all students enrolled in these five sections.

Finally, the matriculation plan at Oxnard College requires that all students complete the entry-level assessment prior to the completion of six semester hours of credit. In sorting the data for this study, it was determined that over ten percent of the students (13) included in the sample had not been tested. As a result, the sample population did not remain constant for each research question investigated.

RESULTS

Table 1 details the comparison of success rates in U.S. History between the cohort of students who demonstrated college-level English skills on the entry-level assessment and the cohort of students who did not demonstrate college-level English skills on the entry-level assessment.

TABLE 1

A Comparison of the Proportion of Students Successfully Completing a College Level U.S. History Course by Entry-Level Assessment Scores

Assessment Score	N	# Successful in U.S. History	Percentage Successful	*z-Test
Below College-Level	73	46	63%	
				z = 1.71
College-Level	26	21	81%	
				p > .05
Total	99	67	68%	
*z-Test for two population proportions				
Where: $n(\pi)$ and $n(1 - \pi)$ are > 5.				

Table 1 suggests that a greater percentage of students who demonstrated college-level English Skills successfully completed U.S. History than students who did not demonstrate college-level English skills. However, this difference was <u>not</u> statistically significant at the .05 level of confidence.

Table 2 delineates the comparison of U.S. History success rates between students who successfully completed a college-level English course prior to enrolling in History and students who did not complete a college-level English course prior to enrolling in History.

TABLE 2

College-Level English Course Completers' and Non-Completers' Success in a College-Level U.S. History Course

Course Level	N	# Successful in U.S. History	Percentage Successful	*z-Test
College-level	21	16	76%	
				z = 1.10
Non-College level	91	57	63%	
				p > .05
Total	112	73	65%	
*z-Test for two population proportions				
Where: $n(\pi)$ and $n(1 - \pi)$ are > 5.				

Table 2 indicates that 76% of the students who took a college-level English course prior to enrolling in U.S. History successfully completed the History course. It also indicates that 63% of the students who did not successfully complete a college-level English course prior to enrolling in U.S. History, successfully completed the History course. The differences in the proportions of students successfully completing the History course between the groups was <u>not</u> statistically significant at the .05 level of confidence.

Table 3 compares the success in the U.S. History course between students who took any English course (college-level or non-college level) prior to enrolling in History and students who did not take an English course prior to enrolling in U.S. History.

TABLE 3

A Comparison of U.S. History Course Success Rate's Between Students Who Took an English Course and Students Who Did Not Take an English Course Prior to Enrolling in History

	N	# Successful in U.S. History	Percentage Successful	*z-Test
English Course Completers	42	26	62%	
				z = .65
English Course Non-Completers	70	47	67%	
				p > .05
Total	112	73	65%	
*z-Test for two population proportions				
Where: $n(\pi)$ and $n(1 - \pi)$ are > 5.				

Table 3 indicates that a slightly larger proportion of students who did not take an English course at Oxnard College successfully completed the U.S. History course than students who did take an English course (college-level or non-college level). The differences in the proportions was not significant at the .05 level of confidence.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Anomalous to much of the research previously discussed, this study suggests that all three Null Hypotheses should be accepted. Statistically speaking, this means:

1. Students who have not demonstrated basic college-level English skills successfully complete a college-level U.S. History course in approximately the same proportion as students who have demonstrated basic college-level English skills.

2. Students who have not successfully completed a college-level English course prior to enrollment in a college-level U.S. History course,

successfully complete the U.S. History course in approximately the same proportion as students who have completed a college-level English course prior to enrolling in U.S. History.

3. Students who have not successfully completed a college-level or non-college level English course prior to enrolling in U.S. History successfully complete U.S. History in approximately the same proportion as students who have completed a college-level or non-college level English course prior to enrollment in U.S. History.

Succinctly, these conclusions indicate that at Oxnard College, college-level English skills do not appear to be a prerequisite to the successful completion of a college-level U.S. History course. As such, the researchers speculate that the U.S. History course curricula does not require extensive college-level English skills to achieve a passing grade.

Because these conclusions are anomalous to much of the previous research, it is recommended that a follow-up study be implemented. However, subsequent researchers should be cognizant of the fact that this study utilized a two category statistical procedure; that is, students either passed the history course or did not pass the history course. Most studies of this nature utilize statistical procedures that measure the amount of variability in one attribute (U.S. History grades) that can be attributed to another variable (English skills). The statistical procedures are significantly different and infer different types of conclusions.

As an aside, it should be noted that the researchers were concerned that over ten percent of the students in the sample population had not been administered the entry-level assessment (see LIMITATIONS, pg. 8) as strongly suggested by Oxnard College matriculation process. This concern and concerns expressed by Jones and Jackson in two previous studies (1991 and 1991) may indicate a need for the college to study the matriculation plan. Specifically, the study should evaluate the college's matriculation plan in terms of legislative mandates, staff and faculty awareness of the plan and its purpose(s), and the degree to which the plan has been implemented and assists students in realizing their educational goals.

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